

Recruiting and Retaining Parent Members on Interagency Teams

The Children's Services Act

Under the Children's Services Act (CSA), parent representatives serve as members of interagency Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT) and Community Policy and Management Teams (CPMT). In these roles, parents add value to the planning and policy making process by bringing ideas and viewpoints from a parent's/family's perspective.

When CSA became law in 1993, Virginia mandated parent representation on teams as part of the interagency planning process. Research demonstrates that children and families have a higher rate of success when parents are involved in the planning and delivery of services. Through the addition of parent representatives, team efforts have been strengthened and child and family successes have increased.

Parent representatives provide a unique perspective in creating systems of care for children and their families. Serving as valuable supporters of other parents, parent representatives can be extremely helpful when they have experienced the FAPT process. This first-hand knowledge of the system makes them integral to the policy planning and decision making process.

Recruiting Parents as Team Members

The first step in this partnership is to identify potential parent team members. Whenever possible seek parents whose children have received services and supports through the FAPT process. When working with families, observe those who are strong advocates for their own child and are able to communicate their thoughts to team members. Nurture relationships with parents who show leadership skills, creativity, and a level of compassion and interest in the well-being of other children and families. Providing outreach to a potential parent representative is worth the time and energy it takes as the pay-off can be team members who are motivated, engaged, reliable, and proud of their involvement on the team. Although parents cannot serve on FAPT while they have an open case to CSA, once services for their child/family are completed, they may be able to be a strong advocate for the CSA in your region through their services on CPMT and FAPT.

Places to Look for Parent Representatives

Although the best place to find parent representatives for CPMT and FAPT is through from your own former clients there are other places where parent representation can be found. Some possibilities are:

- CPMT/FAPT members & case managers from partner agencies who can identify parents who have been served through CSA or their agency
- Special Education Advisory Committees (SEAC) and other similar local groups associated with different child serving agencies
- Local School Division Parent/Teacher Resource Centers (PTRC)
- Local chapters of the National Alliance for Mental Illness and similar advocacy groups
- Principals, school counselors, coordinators of special education, teachers – meet with school staff to assist in identifying dependable, active parents who may be willing to serve
- Graduate schools of education, psychology, social work, or rehabilitative services – many adult students are family members of children with special needs
- Community volunteering websites – OCS has developed position descriptions for both CPMT and FAPT parent representatives (http://www.csa.virginia.gov/html/systems_of_care/families_youth.cfm) which can be useful in creating listings for local community volunteering websites

"Having a parent representative on FAPT and CPMT allows the opportunity for the teams to consider an experienced perspective to better assist families. Parent representatives may be able to encourage families' participation in the FAPT process by sharing their experiences of how the FAPT helped support their family on their journey."

-Christy Corbin, Family Support Partner

Once You Have Identified a Potential Parent Representative

It is important to take the time to complete an interviewing and selection process. It is sometimes difficult for parents to separate personal issues from the cases they are reviewing; however, it is vital that parent members of the team are objective, reliable, and prepared for their role. A well-developed interview can assist in identifying potential issues before they arise.

Once a representative has been selected, plan an orientation meeting where expectations for the parent member can be reviewed. Parents who serve on CPMT and FAPT have different responsibilities than other team members and it is critical for them to fully understand this role. This is also an opportunity to provide parents with realistic information about the commitment of team membership so they can clearly understand the position and its responsibilities.

Talk explicitly with parents about the issue of confidentiality, making sure they understand that they are bound by the same ethical practice as all team members. Although parents who have prior experience with the FAPT process may already be aware of this requirement, it is important to ensure they understand the parameters of confidentiality in their new role. This includes policies regarding conflicts of interest and the need for transparency when these situations arise.

Training

Training is a necessity for most team members; however, it is especially important for parent representatives as they fulfill a very unique role. Potential training needs for parent representatives may include information on commonly encountered diagnoses, available community based services and frequently used treatment options, a glossary of acronyms, family engagement practices, and funding resources. Parents also need to understand the CSA philosophy and information about local policies and procedures.

Ensure that there are opportunities to bring FAPT and CPMT parent representatives together for joint learning experiences. Such events provide venues for parent representatives to meet, share information, and support each other. In addition, provide parent team members with information regarding community based trainings and events relevant to their role. This will serve to increase their knowledge base and deepen their connection with the team.

Retaining Parent Representatives

Retaining and keeping parents involved on the team is important for a variety of reasons. Continuity and cohesiveness are ways CPMT/FAPT benefit from team member retention. Families also benefit, specifically through the relationship they form with the team during the course of care. Parent representatives are key to this relational process as they embody family engagement and link with parents through their own experiences.

The following are just a few strategies which will assist in the retention of parent representatives:

- **Invest in parent representatives** – take the time to ensure that parent representatives are fully engaged in the team process. Provide clear communication of expectations and provide training when skill gaps are identified. Ask parent representatives for their feedback regarding the CPMT/FAPT process, consider their suggestions, and share with others as appropriate.
- **Provide tangible incentives** – some localities are able to offer childcare or cash stipends to parent representatives. If this is a possibility, make sure parent team members are aware of these supports. If not, there are a variety of non-cash means to support parent representatives.
- **Recognize parent representative's contributions** – unlike many other CPMT/FAPT members, parent representatives are volunteering their time. In some instances, they are taking time away from their jobs and families in order to serve their community. If your locality does not already have a specified volunteer recognition program, look for opportunities for the team to share their appreciation with parent members. Opportunities to attend conferences or events, letters from the county board of supervisors/city council, or a thank you note from the team are all cost-effective ways in which parent representatives can be honored.
- **Help parent team members practice self-care** – there is stress involved in hearing difficult family circumstances, and while professionals have colleagues to talk with, parent representatives may find themselves isolated and left without support. Providing an opportunity for team members to debrief following difficult meetings provides parent representatives an environment where they can process any stress or concerns they may be experiencing.
- **Be respectful of parent representative's time** – provide advanced notice of meeting dates and hours. Expect and understand that there may be instances where they may need to miss a meeting due to family commitments.
- **Involve parent representatives in group training opportunities** - this not only allows parent members an opportunity to build their skills, but also reinforces that they are a valued member of the team.